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WHAT HAPPENS AFTER G-D BECOMES KING FOREVER?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Parshat Beshalach tells the story of the Splitting of the Sea twice. The narrator tells it in prose; Mosheh joins Bnei Yisrael to tell it in poetry. This follows a common Tanakhic pattern of embedding a poetic account of subjective experience within an objective prose narrative about the same events.

Part of any event is the effect it has on its audience. A tree that falls in the forest may make as many sounds as there are listeners. If an enemy army heard the wrath of G-d trampling out His vineyard, that sound is as real as, or more real than, the sound of wood cracking that would show up on a recording. The Torah's technique is essential to conveying the event. (*Lehavdil elef alfei havdalot*, consider Norman Mailer's two very different accounts of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon in *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel/The Novel as History*.)

I therefore have little interest in reconciling the two accounts. But I am interested in understanding the differences. I'll focus here on one of them. Why does the poetic account apparently extend to having the Jews in Israel, and the Temple built, and perhaps Ultimate Redemption achieved, when the entire Torah narrative stops before they cross the Jordan? Or less dramatically – why does the poetic account continue into an imagined future?

The shift seems to happen between verses 12 and 13. In verse 12, we are plausibly still in the present:

*You inclined your right (hand);
they will be swallowed up by the land.*

נָטִיתָ יְמִינְךָ
תִּבְלַעַמּוּ אֹרֶץ:

Granted, it's not clear whether the hand in question is Mosheh's or G-d's (although so far as I can tell only Rashbam says that it is Mosheh's, despite the obvious parallel to his inclining his hand to bring the sea back and drown the Egyptians), nor why land rather than water swallows up the Egyptians (most commentators assume they were somehow buried after drowning, and ask in what merit they deserved burial; Keli Yakar fascinatingly makes it a hypothetical: Why did You drown them instead of having the earth swallow them up ala Korach?); but we are

plausibly in the present. In verse 13, however, we seem incontrovertibly to be in the future:

*You led them in Your grace, this nation You redeemed
Directed them in Your strength to Your holy dwelling.*

נָתַיתָ בְּחַסְדְּךָ עַם-יְנֹוּ גְּאֻלָּתָם
בְּתַלְמֹת בְּעֻזְךָ אֶל-גְּבוּהַ קֹדֶשְׁךָ:

If poetry is intended to convey subjective experience, why is it the poetry that goes beyond the moment?

I suspect that the answer is that anticipation is an inextricable part of our experience of the present. Let's read the poetic account through to what may be its end.

*You led them in Your grace, this nation You redeemed
Directed them in Your strength to Your holy dwelling.*

*When nations have heard, they will be discomfited:
A spasm grabbed hold of the inhabitants of Philistia.*

*Then the dukes of Edom were in panic;
the powers of Moab seized by trembling;
all the inhabitant of Canaan melted.*

*Awe and terror will fall upon them
When Your arm becomes great, they will fall silent as a
stone*

*Until your nation traverses, Hashem,
until Your nation which You have brought into existence
traverses*

*You will bring them and plant them in Your mountain
homestead*

*A designated place for your habitation You have made,
Hashem;*

*a sanctuary, our L-rd, Your hands have made.
HASHEM WILL REIGN FOREVER AND EVER.*

נָתַיתָ בְּחַסְדְּךָ עַם-יְנֹוּ גְּאֻלָּתָם
בְּתַלְמֹת בְּעֻזְךָ אֶל-גְּבוּהַ קֹדֶשְׁךָ:
שָׁמְעוּ עַמִּים יְרֵגוּן
תִּיל אִטּוֹ יִשְׁבִּי פְקֻעֹת:
אִנּוּ נִבְהַלּוּ אֱלֹהֵי אֲדוֹם
אֵילֵי מוֹאָב יִאֲחַזְמוּ רֶעֶד
נִלְגּוּ כָּל יִשְׁבֵי כְנָעַן:
תִּפְּל עַל־יָדָם אֵימָתָה וְנִפְתַּח
בְּגִלְל זְרוּעֶיךָ יִדְמֶוּ כְּאֶבֶן
עַד-יִבְרַךְ עַמְּךָ יִלְוֶה
עַד-יִעֲבֹר עַם-יְנֹוּ קִנְיָתָ:

תבאמו ותטעמו בְּהַר נְחֻלְתְּךָ
מְכוּן לְשִׁכְתְּךָ פְּעֻלָּתְךָ יְהוָה
מִקֵּדְשׁ אֲדֹנָי כּוֹנְנֵי יְדִיד:
יְהוָה יִמְלֵךְ לְעֹלָם וָעֶד:

שמה שפרש"י כאן שנתנבא שלא יכנס לארץ –
אינו ר"ל שנתכוון לכך,
אלא נכנסה בפיו נבואה זו באמרו תביאמו ותטעמו
ולא אמר 'תביאנו ותטענו',
אבל לא אמר לדעת כן שלא יכנס לארץ.

The tenses of the verbs in this section are constantly ambiguous. But it seems reasonable to understand them as referring to an expected future. Bnei Yisrael expect that this miracle will lead directly into universal aliyah, the building of the Temple, and the end of history.

One strand in Chazal picks at this ecstatic moment. In Rashi's version,

*You will bring them –
Mosheh prophesied that he would not enter the Land;
That's why the verse doesn't say 'You will bring us'.*

– תביאמו
נתנבא משה שלא יכנס לארץ;
לכך לא נאמר: 'תביאנו'

Sekhel Tov's version is darker:

*The fathers prophesied but do not know what they are
prophesying
until The Holy Blessed One explains it to them -
The verse does not say 'You will bring us' but rather
You will bring them*

*= the children will enter but not the fathers from among
all those of warrior age -
until the time came and The Holy Blessed One
explained it to them,
as Scripture says: If any man from among these men
shall see . . .*

נתנבאו האבות ואינם יודעין מה מתנבאים
עד שהקב"ה מפרש להם;
'תביאנו' לא נאמר כאן אלא תביאמו
= שהבנים נכנסין ואין האבות נכנסין מכל אנשי המלחמה
עד שהגיעה שעה ופי' הקב"ה להם, שנאמר אם יראה איש באנשים
האלה (דברים א לה).

But the darkest and most astonishing version is in Minchat Yehudah:

*Rav Elyakim resolved (a previously raised
contradiction by explaining)
that when Rashi explained here that (Mosheh)
prophesied that he would not enter the Land –
(Rashi) did not mean that Mosheh intended this
prophecy,
rather this prophecy entered into his mouth when he
said You will bring them and plant them
and did not say 'You will bring us and plant us',
but (Mosheh) did not knowingly say this, that he would
not enter the land.
ותירץ הרב ר' אליקים*

Why insert pessimism and death into this moment of ecstasy? Why make Mosheh, soon to become the only human being ever to prophesy without losing consciousness, a Rosencrantz/Guildenstern carrying his own death warrant unaware? Was the Desert Generation doomed long before they commit the sin of the Spies to justify their fate?

A possible clue is that the poem does not actually end in the Redeemed Future. Instead, it circles back to the present:

*When the horse of Pharaoh, with his chariots and his
cavalrymen, came into the sea,
then Hashem turned the waters of the sea back onto
them
then Bnei Yisrael travelled on the dry land in the midst
of the sea.*

כִּי בָא סוּס פִּרְעוֹה בְּרִכְבּוֹ וּבְפָרָשָׁיו בַּיָּם
וַיָּשֻׁב יְהוָה וַיִּלְנַק עֲלֵהֶם אֶת-יַי הַיָּם
וַיִּבְגַּע יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלְכֵי בַיַּבְשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם:

Why the anticlimax?

My general intent in these divrei Torah is to empower you to read Torah more deeply and precisely, not to bludgeon you with my own interpretations. So before reading on, please take at least a moment to consider whether the questions I've raised seem significant to you, and if yes, how you would explain the textual data.

My thoughts went to 1967. The perception and reality of a miraculous victory naturally **and properly** generate an in-the-moment sense that G-d's Plan is inevitably and imminently being fulfilled. Having that experience even once can sustain us eternally and prevent us from falling into cynicism and despair when things go badly.

But the truth is that Redemption is never inevitable, even when it seems imminent. It always depends on our ongoing choices. And when we continue thinking it's inevitable beyond that first moment, we tend to make rushed, impatient, frustrated, even idolatrous choices, often under the illusion that we are acting as super-religious true believers. Our own ecstatic songs develop dark undertones that we have trouble hearing.

Miraculous victories give us a momentary taste of redemption. But then we need to go back to the hard work of deserving it.

Shabbat shalom!